

March 13, 2009

Senate Public Health, Welfare and Safety Committee

Personal Testimony from Sarah Pallis in Support of HB 367

PUBLIC HEALTH, WELFARE & SAFETY

Exhibit No. 3

Date 3-13-2009

Bill No. HB 367

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee: my name is Sarah Pallis, and I'm honored to provide testimony as a proponent of HB 367. I am writing to provide personal testimony on this bill, and not in my capacity as a state employee. I have taken personal time off to testify on this bill.

As a birthmother, I can tell you that the choice between adoption and parenting is the most important, and most difficult, decision I've ever made. I became pregnant unexpectedly during my junior year of college, and during my pregnancy, I made the decision to parent. After my son was born, however, I was overwhelmed by the challenge of caring for and raising him in the way he deserved. In addition to the significant physical effects of pregnancy and birth, I experienced severe postpartum depression and anxiety. Although my family was incredibly supportive of me, I realized very quickly that I was not mentally, emotionally, or financially prepared to raise a child on my own.

It's difficult to describe my experience as a new mother. When I arrived home with my son, the crushing reality of my choice to parent began to sink in. Every time I looked at my baby's beautiful, red, wrinkled face, I was torn apart by love and terror. This breathtaking child, this miracle, deserved the world, and I knew I couldn't give it to him. I was completely inadequate to bear the awesome responsibility of being a mother.

During those weeks, I thought of my own future, too. I'd had so many dreams, hopes, and plans – all the things that seem so possible when you're young, you feel invincible, and you're certain nothing can stand in your way. When I became a mother, my entire universe shifted. Life was no longer all about 'me': it was all about 'we'. I knew that I would have to give up my selfishness, my childishness, and my impulsiveness. I felt that as a single mother I would likely never be able to finish school, never be able to build the life for myself that I'd wanted. I felt angry and cheated, and late one night a thought suddenly came to me: I wanted out. I wanted life to go back to what it had been before. I wanted a do-over. I was so ashamed of feeling that way, but I knew I had to face that very worst part of me and make my choice.

I remember the day I called Rosemary Miller at Catholic Social Services. From that first conversation, I began to feel that there might be hope, a way to make things right for my son, for my family, and for me. I felt as if these people knew what I was going through, as if they understood my powerlessness and desperation, the feeling of being backed into a corner with no way out. They talked to me and listened to me; they treated me with respect and love; they accepted me without judgment or reservation. The more I learned, the more I was convinced that adoption was the solution I was looking for, the sword with which I could slice through my Gordian knot.

On the day my son turned four weeks old, I walked out the door to take him to his new parents. At the agency, I was greeted by a family positively glowing with love, gratitude, and joy. I watched with awe as my son's mother and father experienced those first profound moments with their new baby, and they laughed and cried with me as they held him while his brothers and sisters crowded in to see. Through the haze of my pain and guilt and fear, I began to believe that I'd made the right decision.

The year that followed was the most difficult of my life. My world had crumbled around me, and I felt like I would never be able to pick up the pieces and rebuild it. I had done everything I could for my son, but I didn't know what to do with myself. I was blessed with a loving and supportive family who did everything they could to help me, but I still I felt alone, lost, and completely hopeless.

I would not be where I am today were it not for the wonderful people at Catholic Social Services. Rosemary called me regularly to see how I was, and invited me to come in any time just to talk. She told me that an adoption agency's involvement with a birth parent doesn't end when the child is relinquished; rather, it's at that time that the agency has the greatest opportunity to help the birth parent recover. They were intimately familiar with the struggle I was going through – the pain and loss, the guilt and shame – and they were in a unique position to help.

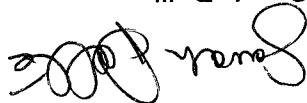
Currently, under Montana law, adoption agencies cannot provide much of the assistance that would help birth parents most. Agencies have the desire, and often the means, to provide resources to birth parents such as transitional housing, transportation, life skills training, and scholarships. No matter how badly a birth parent may need such assistance, however, an adoption agency is legally prohibited from providing it. These same resources, and many more, are freely and widely available to individuals who choose to parent.

I understand that some might object to this bill because they believe it will allow adoption agencies to use the promise of assistance as a means of coercing parents to relinquish their children. By sharing my story, I hope I've been able to communicate in some measure the difficulty, scope, significance, and effect of the decision a birth parent makes. The suggestion that a mother or father would choose adoption over parenting because of the promise of assistance, financial or otherwise, from the adoption agency is simply illogical. Although it's not an easy path, a parent who chooses to raise their child can find help, support, and resources. In Montana, a parent who chooses adoption cannot, and is left alone to cope with the enormous consequences of their decision.

If anything, there is a significant financial disincentive for birth parents to choose adoption; for this reason, it's possible that some mothers and fathers who would have chosen adoption end up parenting instead. HB 367 will not correct the inequity in resources available to birth parents, but it will be a step in the right direction.

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, by voting for HB 367, you will make significant progress toward allowing adoption agencies to provide desperately needed basic resources and assistance to birth parents, at absolutely no cost to Montana taxpayers. I urge you to support this bill.

Thank you,



Sarah Parris

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